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AUTHOR Kelley, Larry H.
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ABSTRACT

Virginia Wesleyan College, a small liberal arts college, recently conducted four major student satisfaction assessment projects. In particular, the institution wanted to know how students evaluated their educational experiences and how they evaluated college programs and services. The assessment projects, conducted during the 1991-92 and 1992-93 academic years included graduate follow-up surveys, non-returning student surveys, assessment of the college environment by an external team of consultants, and administration of the College Student Experiences Questionnaire. Results indicated that students, non-returning students, and graduates were generally satisfied with their educational experiences and with programs and services at the college. However, findings also revealed several areas of dissatisfaction. The graduate follow-up survey indicated that students were dissatisfied with registration processes, computer availability, library services, rules and regulations, career planning and placement services, food quality, the freshman seminar, cost of attending the college, and lack of financial aid resources. The evaluation by the external team which interviewed students found that students valued the small, caring atmosphere of the campus but were dissatisfied with the cost of attending, rules and regulations, communication with the administration, and other quality of life issues. Includes seven tables. (JB)

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Utilizing Multiple Measures to Assess Student Satisfaction

ED 376 764

Larry H. Kelley
Virginia Wesleyan College

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes four major assessment projects which were recently conducted at a small east coast liberal arts college. Both qualitative and quantitative techniques were utilized to determine the level of student satisfaction with educational experiences at the college and with college programs and services. Results are presented along with a brief overview of follow-up assessment activities. The information provided in this paper should be useful to other colleges and universities interested in utilizing qualitative and quantitative methods to assess student satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

In this period of limited financial resources, colleges and universities are stepping up efforts to insure student satisfaction and thus, improve retention. Various assessment procedures have been developed to determine if students are satisfied with their educational experiences, with college programs and services, and with the overall college environment.

Erwin (1991) indicated that education can apply to more than experiences in the classroom. Other college programs and services and activities on and off campus can impact the development of students.

Information provided in Senate Document No. 14 (1986) supported the assertion that the college experience includes more than cognition. The document further suggested that these attributes may be assessed by a survey designed to measure the attitudes of students and their level of satisfaction with the college experience.

Stevenson, Walleri, and Japely (1985) noted that such a survey can be a valuable instrument to determine if, after sufficient time to reflect, graduates are satisfied with the experiences they had in college.

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (1991) indicated that institutions should utilize a variety of procedures to evaluate the effectiveness of educational

programs and services. These may include self-report instruments which measure changes in the attitudes and behavior of students, graduate follow-up surveys, and interviews of students and graduates.

A small east coast liberal arts college recently implemented a series of assessment projects which encompass all of the areas discussed above. Through these projects, the college sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do current students, non-returning students, and graduates evaluate their educational experiences at the college?

2. How do they evaluate college programs and services?

The projects, which were conducted during the 1991-92 and 1992-93 academic years, included the following:

1. Graduate follow-up surveys
2. Non-returning student surveys
3. Assessment of the college environment by an external team of consultants (Roberts, Saunders, Lefferts, and Beers, 1992)
4. The College Student Experiences Questionnaire (Pace, 1990)

The purpose of this paper is to report the results of these procedures and to briefly describe follow-up assessment activities.

VWC STUDENT SATISFACTION PROJECT

The Office of Institutional Research and Assessment at Virginia Wesleyan College (VWC) annually implements a variety of assessment activities to determine the level of student satisfaction with educational experiences at the college and with college programs and services. In 1991 and 1992, the office utilized both qualitative and quantitative procedures to determine if currently enrolled students, non-returning students, and graduates were satisfied with their experiences at VWC.

Method

Graduate Follow-up Survey. The target population was composed of 1110 VWC graduates. The first group of 547 graduated in 1987, 1989, or 1991 and the second group of 563 graduated in 1988, 1990, or 1992. Initial surveys were sent to the first group in February, 1992 and to the second group in October of the same year. In each case, a second survey was sent approximately one month later to those who could not be identified as respondents to the initial survey. A total of 576 completed surveys were returned for an overall return rate of 51.9 percent.

Non-returning Student Survey. The target population was composed of 741 students who had attended VWC during either the Spring 1991, Fall 1991, or Spring 1992 semester but failed to return for classes the following term. Initial

surveys were sent to students about two weeks after it was determined that they had not continued their enrollment. In each case, a second survey was sent approximately one month later to those who could not be identified as respondents to the initial survey. A total of 369 completed surveys were returned for an overall return rate of 49.8 percent.

External Assessment of the College Environment. In 1992, a team of consultants from four small Virginia colleges conducted a comprehensive assessment of the VWC campus (Roberts et al., 1992). This project included the study of historical and current print/non-print information, observation/study of the campus environment and activities, and focus group and individual interviews of students, graduates, faculty, staff, and Board of Trustee members. Over 100 individuals, including 60 current students and ten graduates, participated in the interviews which were conducted over a two day period in February. Follow-up meetings were held in May to discuss the results of the consultants' preliminary report and to address additional concerns which had surfaced since the first interviews.

College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ). In April, 1992, as a quantitative follow-up to the external assessment project described above, the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (Pace, 1990) was administered to 262 students enrolled in randomly selected 9:30 a.m. Tuesday/Thursday

classes. This class period was chosen because a wide variety of classes were offered at this time; class enrollment was high; and participants represented a cross-section of the general student population.

Results

A complete description of the results of these projects have been reported elsewhere (Virginia Wesleyan College, Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 1992). While space does not permit a complete description of the findings here, selected results will be presented.

Graduate Follow-up Survey. One section of this survey contains items related to graduates' overall reactions to the college. These data are displayed in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 Here

Over 91 percent of responding graduates indicated that apart from the financial benefit, VWC had helped improve the quality of their life. Nearly 79 percent indicated that they would attend VWC again and over 84 percent would recommend it to friends. Over 65 percent reported that the quality of education provided by VWC was better than that provided by other colleges or universities they had attended.

The survey also includes a series of items related to graduates' evaluations of a variety of educational and

support services at VWC. Data related to items which received very favorable ratings from responding graduates are displayed in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 Here

Over 97 percent of respondents expressed satisfaction with the size of classes. Over 95 percent were satisfied with the friendliness of faculty and staff and over 94 percent were satisfied with the size of the college, its location, and the helpfulness and individual attention of faculty. Over 91 percent expressed satisfaction with the quality of instruction.

Data related to aspects of VWC receiving less favorable evaluations can be seen in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 Here

These included the registration process, the availability of computers and computer labs, library services, college rules and regulations, career planning and placement services, the quality of food/service in the dining center, freshman seminar, and the cost of attending the college.

Non-returning Student Survey. The non-returning student survey approaches assessment of student satisfaction in a

different manner. One section contains items related to respondents' reasons for leaving the college. Another section contains questions eliciting respondents' suggestions for improving college programs and services.

Data related to respondents' reasons for leaving VWC are displayed in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 Here

Nearly 37 percent of responding former students indicated that the cost of attending the college had a major influence on their decision to leave. Nearly 27 percent indicated that they had experienced financial problems or lacked sufficient financial aid to continue. Nearly 16 percent of respondents reported that they did not continue because their desired major was not offered at VWC. These evaluations were reenforced through respondents' comments.

Verbatim comments also revealed that, although respondents had decided to leave, many were satisfied with several aspects of the college. These included the college's location, helpfulness and individual attention of faculty, the size of classes, and quality of the academic programs.

When asked for suggestions about improving college programs and services, a considerable number of respondents cited an urgent need for additional sources of financial aid to help offset college expenses. Quite a few also recommended that

steps be taken to rectify existing communication problems between students and the college's administration.

College Student Experiences Questionnaire. One section of this questionnaire contains items related to current students' overall opinions of VWC. These data can be seen in Table 5.

Insert Table 5 Here

Nearly 86 percent of respondents indicated that they liked or were enthusiastic about VWC. Nearly three-fourths indicated that they would attend the college again.

Several CSEQ items deal with students' evaluations of the college environment. Data related to these items are illustrated in Table 6.

Insert Table 6 Here

Nearly nine of ten responding students gave high ratings to VWC's emphasis on academics. Over 83 percent indicated that faculty members were approachable and helpful and over 80 percent reported friendly, supportive relationships with other students. Nearly 68 percent of respondents cited helpful, considerate relationships with administrative personnel and offices.

External Assessment of the College Environment. The external team of consultants asked several questions during focus group and individual interview sessions which dealt with students' evaluations of various aspects of the campus environment. Responses to these questions can be seen in Table 7.

Insert Table 7 Here

Students indicated that the small, caring atmosphere of the VWC campus was especially important to them. Further, the college's location, near the beach, was a key factor in their positive attitude toward the college. Students also expressed satisfaction with the availability and helpfulness of faculty, the instructional programs, and academic support services.

Students were less satisfied with some other aspects of VWC. These included the cost of attending the college, rules and regulations, communication between students and the college's administration, recreational and social activities, accessibility of facilities, isolated location of the college, student parking, the lack of college traditions, formal or sterile appearance of the college, and sources of college news and information.

Discussion

The results of the projects reported here provide initial answers to the questions put forth earlier. In general, current students, non-returning students, and graduates indicated that they were satisfied with their educational experiences at VWC and with programs and services provided by the college. Thus, the results provide evidence that the college has been effective in providing a quality learning environment for students. However, findings also revealed several key areas of dissatisfaction which must be addressed if the college is to become more effective.

The results also confirm that the methodologies employed in this study can be valuable components of an overall effort to assess an institution's effectiveness.

Conclusions

The results of these projects help answer the two major questions posed earlier regarding student satisfaction. The projects demonstrated that, at least at one small liberal arts college, students are generally satisfied with their educational experiences and with college programs and services.

Although the methodologies employed here provided valuable information regarding the overall effectiveness of VWC,

additional assessment activities are needed to further investigate student dissatisfaction with some key aspects of the college.

Several such projects were undertaken recently. First, the Student Affairs Division held a series of meetings to discuss a report prepared by external consultants concerning the qualitative assessment of the VWC environment in 1992. Staff members developed action plans to address key recommendations made by the consultants regarding student dissatisfaction with the college and then, assigned responsibilities for implementing the plans.

Second, a group of 30 faculty and staff members attended a retreat in a quiet, secluded setting where they participated in two days of intensive discussions about the results of recent graduate follow-up and non-returning student surveys and other issues related to student satisfaction and retention. The group identified critical concerns and developed plans to address them.

Third, a survey of current students, faculty, and staff was conducted to take a closer look at concerns which surfaced during the retreat and in previous assessment activities. This survey was followed by focus group discussions and other surveys to further pinpoint problem areas and to seek solutions.

The results of this study indicate that the assessment procedures described in this paper can be important components of a systematic effort to assess student satisfaction as it relates to overall institutional effectiveness. Further, when used together, the procedures may be of considerable value as a model for other colleges and universities.

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Table 1

GRADUATE FOLLOW-UP SURVEY: SATISFACTION WITH VWC OVERALL

	Number of Responses*	Percent
VWC Improved Quality of Life (n=572)		
Definitely	354	61.9%
Probably	168	29.4
Uncertain	32	5.6
Probably not	13	2.3
Definitely not	5	0.9
Would Attend VWC Again (n=573)		
Definitely	299	52.2%
Probably	152	26.5
Uncertain	68	11.9
Probably not	33	5.8
Definitely not	21	3.7
Would Recommend VWC to Friends (n=571)		
Yes	482	84.4%
Unsure	70	12.3
No	19	3.3
Quality of VWC Education (n=563)		
Much better	145	25.8%
Better	222	39.4
About the same	106	18.8
Worse	15	2.7
Uncertain	75	13.3

* Calculations for this table were based on the actual number responding to each item.

Table 2

GRADUATE FOLLOW-UP SURVEY: ASPECTS OF VWC RECEIVING VERY POSITIVE EVALUATIONS

	Number of Responses	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied
Size of classes	570	97.2%	2.3%	0.5%
Faculty friendliness	568	95.3	3.2	1.6
Faculty helpfulness	569	94.7	4.2	1.1
College location	566	94.5	4.9	0.5
Size of college	566	94.2	4.6	1.2
Quality-instruction	567	91.2	6.9	1.9

NOTE: Data were collected utilizing a 5-point scale ranging from very satisfied to very dissatisfied. Thus, the "satisfied" column includes "very satisfied" and "somewhat satisfied" responses combined and the "dissatisfied" column includes "somewhat dissatisfied" and "very dissatisfied" responses combined.

Table 3

GRADUATE FOLLOW-UP SURVEY: ASPECTS OF VWC RECEIVING LESS FAVORABLE EVALUATIONS

	Number of Responses	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied
Registration process	567	57.7%	21.0%	21.3%
Computers/labs	498	52.2	26.7	21.1
Library Services	564	51.8	24.6	23.6
Rules/regulations	542	43.2	37.5	19.4
Career planning	506	37.5	33.6	28.9
Dining Center	469	37.5	41.8	20.7
Freshman seminar	400	31.5	43.3	25.3
Cost of attending	559	25.8	31.1	43.1

NOTE: Data were collected utilizing a 5-point scale ranging from very satisfied to very dissatisfied. Thus, the "satisfied" column includes "very satisfied" and "somewhat satisfied" responses combined and the "dissatisfied" column includes "somewhat dissatisfied" and "very dissatisfied" responses combined.

Table 4

NON-RETURNING STUDENT SURVEY: REASONS FOR LEAVING VWC

	Number of Responses*	Percent
Cost of Attending the College (n=333)		
Major influence	123	36.9%
Minor influence	64	19.2
No influence	146	43.8
Experienced Financial Problems (n=331)		
Major influence	89	26.9%
Minor influence	52	15.7
No influence	190	57.4
Desired Major Not Offered (n=332)		
Major influence	52	15.7%
Minor influence	24	7.2
No influence	256	77.1

* Calculations for this table were based on the actual number responding to each item.

Table 5

CSEQ: STUDENTS' OVERALL OPINIONS OF VWC

	Number of Responses*	Percent
Attitude Toward The College (n=262)		
Enthusiastic about VWC	98	37.4%
Like it	127	48.5
More or less neutral	36	13.7
Do not like it	1	0.4
Would Attend VWC Again (n=262)		
Yes, definitely	90	34.4%
Probably yes	106	40.5
Probably no	40	15.3
No, definitely	26	9.9

* Calculations for this table were based on the actual number responding to each item.

Table 6

CSEQ: STUDENTS' EVALUATIONS OF VWC ENVIRONMENT

	Number of Responses	Percent
VWC's Emphasis on Academics (n=262)		
Strong emphasis	228	87.0%
Neutral	28	10.7
Weak emphasis	6	2.3
Relationships with Faculty (n=262)		
Approachable & helpful	218	83.2%
Neutral	30	11.5
Remote & discouraging	14	5.3
Relationships with Other Students (n=262)		
Friendly & supportive	210	80.2%
Neutral	33	12.6
Competitive & uninvolved	19	7.3
Relationships with Administrative Personnel and Offices (n=262)		
Helpful & considerate	177	67.6%
Neutral	36	13.7
Rigid & impersonal	49	18.7

NOTE: Data were collected utilizing a 7-point scale ranging from very negative responses (one) to very positive responses (seven). Thus, the "positively-worded" rows contain ratings of five, six, and seven combined and the "negatively-worded" rows contain ratings of one, two, and three combined. "Neutral" rows contain ratings of four.

Table 7

EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT: STUDENTS' EVALUATIONS OF VWC ENVIRONMENT

Aspects of VWC Receiving Favorable Evaluations	Aspects of VWC Receiving Less Favorable Evaluations
Small caring atmosphere	Cost of attending VWC
Location of the college (near the beach)	Communication between students & administration
Availability of faculty	Rules & regulations
Helpfulness of faculty	Sources of college news
Academic Support Services	Accessibility of facilities
Quality of instructional programs	Recreational and social activities
	Isolated location of college
	Student parking
	Lack of traditions
	Formal appearance of college

NOTE: The items listed in this table represent responses most often given by students during individual and focus group interviews conducted by a team of external consultants.